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FUNCTION OF A HOME ECONOMICS SPECIALIST

By

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The purpose of a specialist, as the disctionary defines that word, is "one who devotes himself to some special branch." The word clothing designates the "branch" or area of subject matter. Today a successful specialist must have at her fingertips not only subject matter, but also the ability "to make to know how," that is, the best way to help people themselves, or educational methods.

Shortly after the Smith-Lever Act was passed in 1914, home economics specialists were appointed on several midwestern State staffs. Miss Dodson, extension clothing specialist, California, has told us that one of the first national clothing conference was held at Ames in the early 1920's. During the last 20 years the clothing specialist group has grown from fewer than 20 to 68 full-time State clothing specialists.

Specialist Qualifications

The qualifications for a specialist, according to a 1938 study ^{1/}, are (1) a home economics degree and preferably some advanced study (more than half of the clothing specialists in 1938 had their master's degrees; (2) some experience, preferably as a home demonstration agent or as a teacher; and (3) a rural background and sympathy and interest in rural people's problems and needs.

The Importance of Clothing Specialist Work

Whenever family living needs of people are discussed, they are usually listed in terms of food, clothing, and shelter. There is a growing interest in clothing problems because the national situation is changing. Our great grandparents produced and manufactured their own food, clothing and shelter. Farm people, as well as those living in cities, are having to buy their family living needs now, therefore there is greater need for "consumer education." A few authorities predict that in the future, programs on clothing construction may disappear as we learn better techniques for providing ready-made clothes at prices the majority of people can pay.

^{1/} Preparation and Training of State Extension Subject Matter Specialists, by Lucinda Crile, associate extension analyst, Division of Field Studies and Training, United States Department of Agriculture, Extension Service, Circular 371, November 1941.

When You Function as a Teacher

A successful teacher, as studies show again and again, must have the "know how" on what she teaches. The "know how" comes from research, from your own experiences, from the training you have had, and from the experience and knowledge of the homemakers and 4-H girls with whom you work. To you is left the responsibility for deciding what you teach. From the wealth of information at your command, you decide the major problems and block out the way to action.

Whom you teach is important. In a general way, studies indicate that your best returns comes from working first with county extension agents, second with local leaders and third with farm people. It is axiomatic that working with youth will give you a greater return for your time and effort than working with adults. Therefore, attention especially to the needs of older youth groups and the young homemakers of today should be an important part of your procedure.

How you teach is important. The "demonstration" is the keystone of Extension Service work. Extension studies show, as other extension staff members will tell you, that the use of the radio, the newspaper, and the local leader, are all important ways by which we can reach many people whom we ordinarily do not reach through direct contact.

When You Function as a Planner

A subject-matter specialist is expected to provide basic data upon which programs can be developed. Therefore, information especially on how much money people have to spend for clothing, some of their patterns of spending, their buying knowledges, and their knowledge of construction and care of clothing and textiles is all basic information that a planner uses in planning. The specialist must relate her specialty to other current problems, keeping in mind long-time goals. As planning progresses, she aids in clarifying objectives and helps other people, as well as extension workers, to put their plans into action.

When You Act as Leaders

The functions of planning, teaching, and leading are interrelated. Other staff members, both States and county, turn to the clothing specialist for guidance. To be a leader, you must have the qualities that cause others to turn to you for knowledge in your subject matter. You must have proved your ability to get results. You are the connecting link between research and the rural people.

When You Function as a Coordinator

The solutions to clothing problems, whether they are individual, county, or State, lie in many fields. As a State specialist, one of your objectives is to correlate your work with that of other specialists and other programs. The development of correlated programs with other professional groups, with lay organizations, and with the business is left to your guidance.

Of special significance is the program being developed by the National Consumer Retailer Council on Teacher-Retailer Cooperation. The objective is to help teachers in the school system and the home demonstration agent in the Extension Service, develop plans with local retailers to place on the market the quality of goods that students, homemakers, and 4-H groups are being taught to look for when they go to the stores to buy. Such a program requires ability to work with and for others.

When You Function as an Evaluator

What you accomplish will depend on what you start out to teach. If you know what you plan to teach, then you can develop ways of measuring it. Figures do not tell the entire story. As you go forward in your program, there is a need to devise better ways of measuring your progress in the tangible values of clothing programs as well as the specific number of sewing machines repaired, or dresses made. More help on evaluation will be available to you in the future, as research techniques in this field are developed.

Agree - Disagree Statements

The function of a home economics specialist basically will probably not change in many years to come. She will remain a teacher, a planner, a coordinator, an evaluator, and a leader. But the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the people with whom she works will change. Specialists must be alert to such changes and ready to adjust to changing situations. Those agree-disagree questions are indicative of the type of change that confronts the clothing specialist today.

Agree Disagree

- ----- "Service" work secures the most friends for Extension Service and greater backing by influential people.
- ----- Program planning is the function of the supervisor.
- ----- The specialist has no responsibility for seeing that people can buy the garments she recommends or that the quality of materials she teaches is the best buy.
- ----- The day and age when a specialist needs to "practice what she preaches" has passed.

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